AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE SURVEY NEAR TAROOM, SOUTH-EASTERN QUEENSLAND

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The area chosen for this survey is part of the central highlands of Queensland. This district also includes the Carnarvon Gorge and Mt. Moffatt. Excavations have been undertaken at Cathedral Cave (Clegg, 1965) in the Carnarvon Gorge and, more importantly, those at the Tombs and Kenniff Cave near Mt. Moffatt (Mulvaney, 1965) have demonstrated human occupation of the region for at least sixteen thousand years. Other sites, particularly in the Carnarvon Gorge, are well known for paintings and engravings (Elkin, 1941; Goddard, 1941, 1942), which appear to belong to a distinct regional style, different from those recorded for northern New South Wales and for northern Queensland. This central highlands style is now recorded from the upper Dawson River valley towards the eastern limits of the region.

Since the country is extremely rugged it was not possible to examine the entire length of Robinson Creek as originally intended and only three small groups of sites (text-figure 1 Areas 2, 3, 4) were visited. The party was told of the existence of a number of other sites, notably in Mount Surprise National Park so that the survey cannot be considered exhaustive. However, certain interesting implications arise from the placement of the sites and their decoration. A small group of sites on the Dawson River near Robinson Creek (Area 1) was also investigated.

Site numbers quoted are Queensland Museum site survey reference numbers.

SITES EXAMINED

AREA 1. The sites are located near Postman Gully on the Dawson River. One (TAM 33) is a small cave close to the river bank, the other three (TAM 34, 35, and 36) are shelters. Two of these are in a small gully about two hundred yards from the north bank of the river; the third is a similar distance from the south bank up a small steep gully. All are decorated. In this area the Dawson River has permanent water and the country is open and rolling although the sandstone outcrops tend to erode into steep-sided gullies close to the river, thus forming many shelters and some caves.

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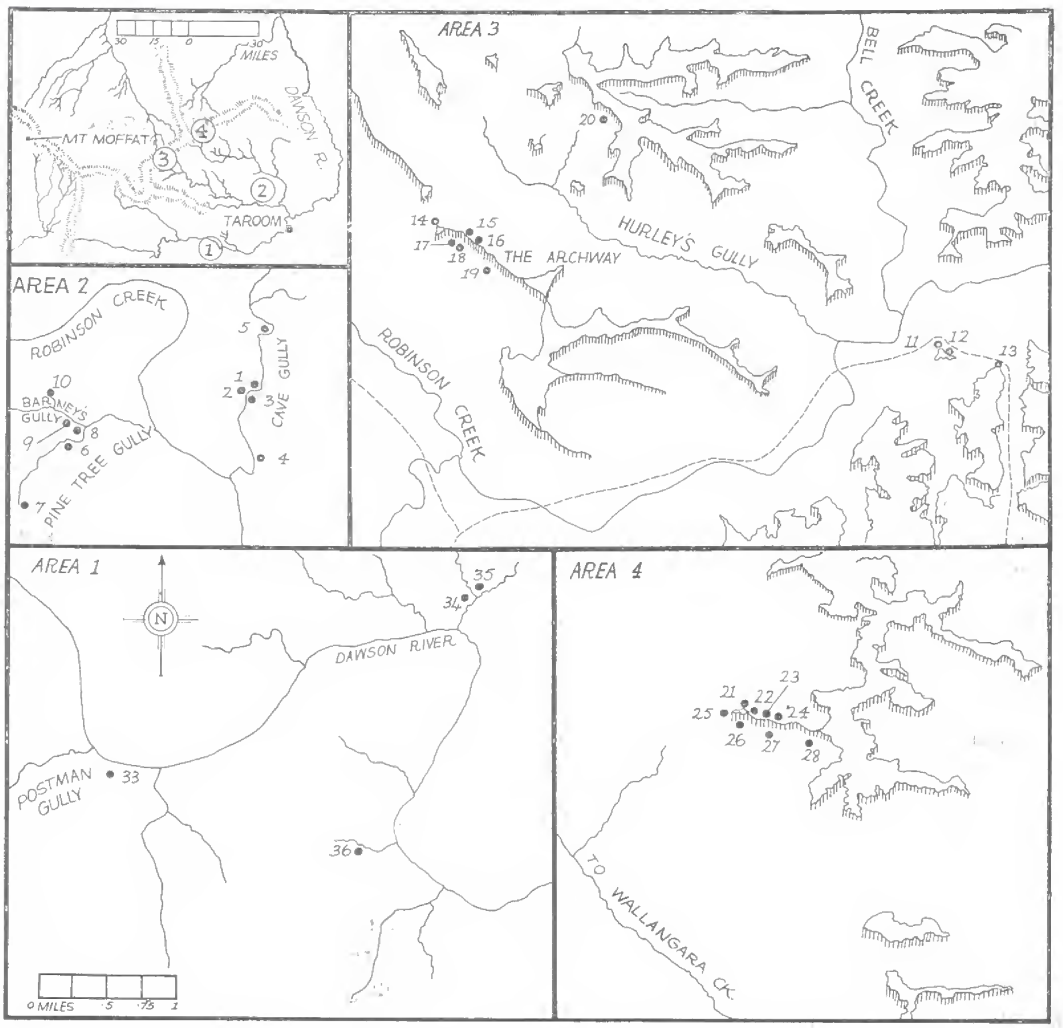

FIG. 1: Locations of sites 1–27 and 33–6 in Areas 1–4. The location of these Areas is shown in the upper left hand map.

AREA 2: Although it lacks permanent water, a similar description may be applied to the Cave Gully area on Robinson Creek, where an important group of sites (TAM 1–10) is located. Eight of these sites are decorated, one (TAM 3) is a find spot and one (TAM 5) appears to be a quarry and workshop. Five of the sites (TAM 1–5) are along Cave Gully on the north of the creek, the other five (TAM 6–10) are in the Pine Tree/Barney's/Blackfellers' Gully area to the south-west. In particular, site TAM 10 in Blackfellers' Gully, which is invisible from the surrounding plain, and where a large number of worked flakes were picked up from the surface, might repay detailed archaeological investigation.

AREA 3: The ten sites are divided between the head of Robinson Creek gorge (TAM 11, 12, and 13), the Archway (TAM 15–19), and the head of a small gully feeding to Bell Creek (TAM 20). Apart from an ochre source (TAM 19) all sites are decorated shelters. The situations of these shelters are rather different from those near Cave and Postman Gullies because of the different topography. This rugged upland region is an extremely dissected sandstone tableland, the remnants of which stand about three hundred feet above the valley floors. All the valley walls are steeply cliffed, the lower half being covered by talus slopes. The sites are located along the tops of these slopes and as a result they are always more than a quarter of a mile from the nearest water source. It is probably significant that all the sites recorded are clustered around prominent landmarks.

AREA 4: The terrain around the head waters of Wallangara Creek is equally as rugged as upper Robinson Creek. Of the eight sites recorded, one (TAM 28) is an ochre source, but the rest are decorated shelters. All these sites are located on a large bluff with a natural archway.

A number of contrasts may thus be drawn between upland and lowland sites. As well as those mentioned above some other differences are apparent. Of the twelve decorated sites in the lowland areas, six (TAM 1, 4, 6, 7, 10, and 33) are solution caves, low roofed, and semi-circular, having the front generally straight. These often appear to have only a small depth of deposit. The other six sites in Areas 1 and 2 are shelters. All these lowland sites are in sheltered and concealed places along the walls of gullies. In addition all lowland sites are within a quarter of a mile of water and close to resources of tool stone, particularly quartzite pebbles, and in general lowland sites are not intensively decorated, although TAM 4 and TAM 1 are exceptions.

The sixteen decorated upland sites are all shelters. Quite a variation in size was noted from the large sites (TAM 27, 20, 17, and 13) to the "cubby-hole" sized TAM 26. Seven of the sites are exposed to extensive water wash and flaking is common on the walls. None of the shelters is in as protected a position as the lowland ones, but even where water wash is worst, it is evident that the area decorated was formerly extensive and, as Table 1 shows, a very large number of paintings were recorded at many sites. No tool stone resources other than small quartz pebbles in the walls of some shelters were recorded near the upland sites.

PAINTINGS

Table 1 presents a summary of the numbers of paintings, colours, and techniques used in the twelve lowland (Areas 1 and 2) and sixteen upland decorated sites (Areas 3 and 4) which were examined.

TABLE 1

ANALYSIS OF PAINTINGS ACCORDING TO MOTIF, TECHNIQUE, COLOUR, NUMBERS AND AREA.

LOWLAND SITES

Motif											COMMON MOTIFS					
Technique	P	P	P	P	P	P	S	S	P	P	S	S	S	S	S	P
1	10w*	2w*	4w*								45w 3r	5w 1r	2w	1w		2w*
2				1w	1w	1w	1w				18w 1r		1w			
4											42w 13r					
6											1r					
7		1w*									19w					1w*
8								1r			6w 2r	1w	1w			
9											3w 4r					
10	6w*										8w	1m				1w*
33											3w 3r					
34									1w*		6w 2b	2w				
35											5w	1w			1w	
36										1r	4w 2m 2b	1b				
Total	16	3	4	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	192	12	4	1	1	4

UPLAND SITES

Motif									
Technique	P	S	S	P	S	P	P	S	
11									50r 11m
12									3r
13									16m 85r 1r
14									8r 1r
15									1m 3r
16	1r	1r							17r 2y 9m 1y 1r 1r 1r
17									5r
18									5r 1r
20									2m 95r 2y 4r
21									*
22									*
23			1r						* 1r
24									*
25									76r 7r 1r*
26									11r
27				1r	1r	1r	1r	4r	80r 40m 2r 2r 1r*
Total	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	4	est. 550 15 1 1 6 2

TECHNIQUE

S stencil

P painting

* groups of motifs

COLOUR

r red orange

m mulberry

y yellow

b black

w white

* faded or waterwashed

It is important to note that no engravings and only two techniques of painting were recorded. These are the negative stencil (S on the table) and brushed on pigment (P). Both techniques occur in upland and lowland sites, although painted marks are more common in the latter. All paintings are monochromes.

The differences in colouration between lowland and upland sites are very striking. White and black never occur in the upland sites, yellow never in the lowland sites. Red-orange and mulberry colours are extremely rare in lowland sites, and it is interesting to note that in three sites (TAM 1, 9, and 10) red paintings are superimposed on white ones. White was never observed to be superimposed on red. A possible explanation for the red over white paintings is that the walls of the lowland shelters are generally blackened by fungus and present an unsuitable background for red pigments.

The majority of all paintings recorded in upland sites are a bright red-orange, but a deeper mulberry colour is also widespread. Yellow was recorded only at sites TAM 16 and 20. At site TAM 27, in Area 4, red-orange paintings were superimposed on mulberry ones and this raises the question of whether the mulberry-coloured pigment was originally red-orange. Rocks from the ochre sources TAM 19 and 28, which are mulberry-coloured in the hand specimens, give red-orange powders when freshly ground, but any direct evidence of colour change due to ageing is lacking. It should be added that the mulberry-coloured paintings appear to carry much less pigment than the red-orange ones. However, no transition of shade between bright red-orange and mulberry was noted, as might have been expected if the above suggestion was accepted, unless a long period of disuse separated paintings of the two colours.

Altogether 30 painting forms were recorded, and of these 20 occur uniquely. Six of these 20 forms can only be described as amorphous painted marks and are not listed in Table 1. Five such forms were recorded in upland sites and one in a lowland site. Of the ten repeated motifs, six are common to both types of country, while each of the other four occurs in but one area, and in two cases at one site only.

The six motifs common to both upland and lowland sites can be easily characterized. Four represent common tools—boomerangs, clubs, axes, and grinding stones, and are always stencilled. Boomerangs are usually shown horizontally, but one was pictured upright. Nulla nullas are also stencilled horizontally, as are axes, which are always shown with the blade down. More of the round marks interpreted as mullers (extreme left of plate 10, fig. 1) were recorded in upland sites. Here also the criss-cross pattern supposed to represent part of the *Macrozamia* palm (Goddard, 1941: 369–70) was found in very large patches, although the sign itself was also recorded in lowland sites where no stencilled mullers were seen.

Stencilled hands were by far the most common motif, accounting for 78 per cent of the lowland paintings and 93 per cent of the upland ones. They were seen in a great variety of forms and positions, particularly in upland sites. Here mainly left hands both large and small predominated, but hands and forearms both horizontal and vertical appeared, as did fists, hands with fingers bent under or mutilated, and hands in lateral view. Sites TAM 16 and 20 in Area 3 and site TAM 27 in Area 4 have extensive galleries of hands. Part of the gallery at this latter site is shown in plate 10, fig. 1.

Three of the motifs unique to site TAM 27 are shown in plate 10, fig. 2, while in contrast plate 10, fig. 3, is part of site TAM 1 in Area 2.

STONE TOOLS

Tool stone was collected where it appeared on the surface of the deposits. The materials included quartzite (74 per cent) chalcedonic silica (19 per cent), silicified wood (4 per cent) and quartz (3 per cent). Both quartz and quartzite occur in pebble form in the local sandstones, but chalcedonic silica and silicified wood appear to have been imported.

The collection totalled only 133 pieces, of which 83 per cent came from lowland sites. Collections were made at seven of the fourteen sites in Areas 1 and 2, but only three of the sixteen upland sites in Areas 3 and 4. As well, ochre samples were collected from the two upland sources. All surface tool stone material visible was collected, except at site TAM 5 in Cave Gully, which was an open workshop and quarry, and at the site in Blackfeller's Gully (TAM 10) where water scour at the front of the cave exposed large numbers of flakes and chips.

Whereas 53 per cent of the collection was used in some way, less than 3 per cent may be classified as formal tools (2 horsehoof cores and one "hand-axe"). These tools and two otherwise unused cores were found on lowland sites. Flakes make up 80 per cent of the whole collections, while chips and miscellaneous broken pieces account for 15 per cent.

The oval bifacially worked tool from TAM 5 in Cave Gully, shown in text-fig. 2a, is water-rolled, but closely resembles a rather crude hand-axe of the Euro-African tradition. A piece from TAM 10 in Blackfeller's Gully may be the tip of a similar tool (text-fig. 2b). A small horsehoof core from site TAM 33 on the Dawson River is also illustrated (text-fig. 2c).

A selection from the remaining 67 utilized pieces is shown in text-fig. 2d–n. Of these 55 are struck flakes which retain their striking platform, but otherwise show no consistent morphological pattern. An analysis of the 95 use fractured edges on these 67 pieces shows that 59 per cent are straight, 22 per cent are convex and 18 per cent are concave. Only 4 per cent of the utilized edges on these tools are retouched, and the used fractured edges vary from quite sharp to very blunt indicating a wide range of usage intensity.

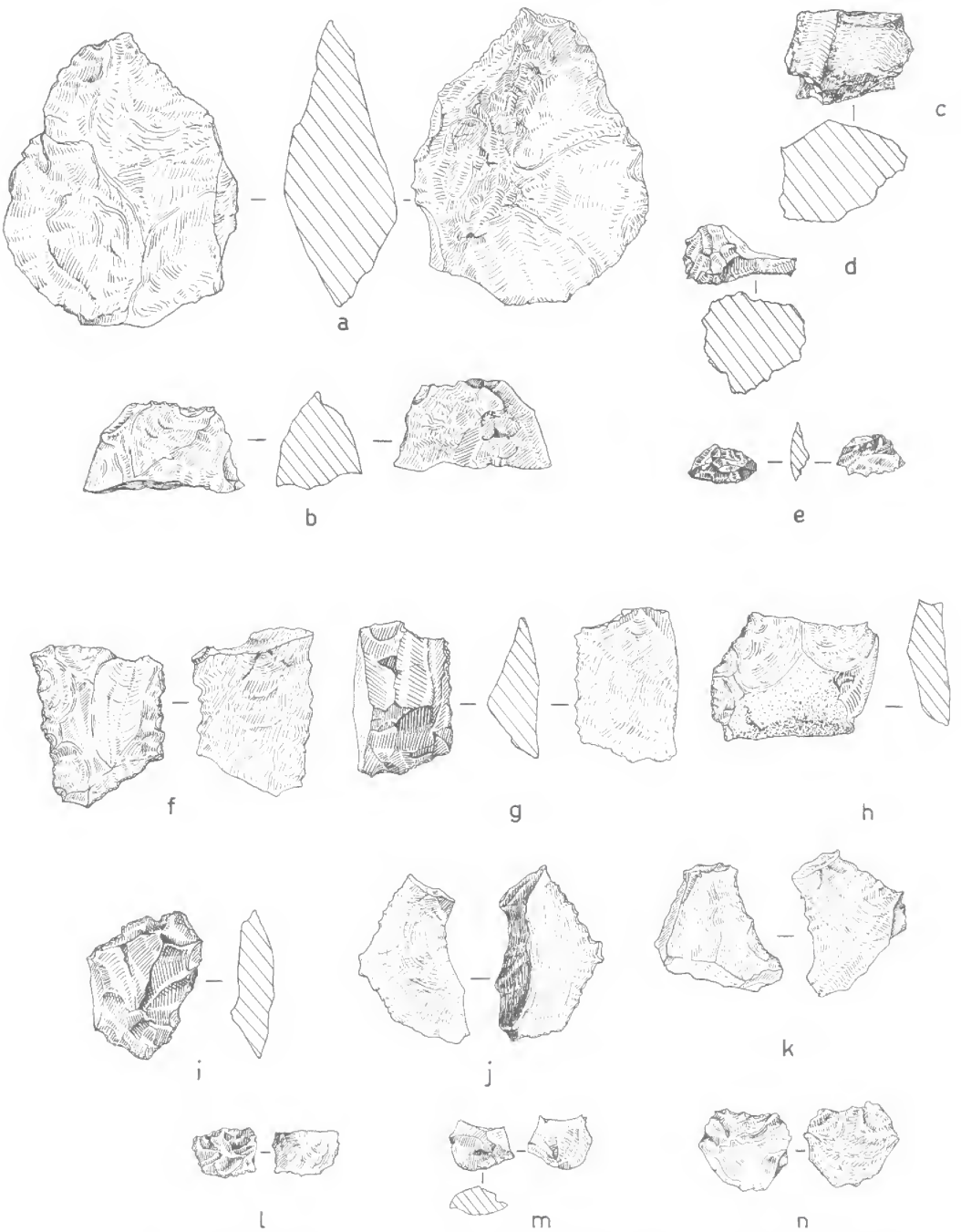

FIG. 2: A selection of the stone tools from sites in Areas 1–4. For explanation see text.

The twelve utilized pieces which do not seem to have come from struck flakes which retain a striking platform have a variety of forms and thicknesses. Those which do not appear to be broken struck flakes seem to have been the result of shatter, either deliberately by percussion or heating, or fortuitously.

The sizes and shapes of the utilized pieces tend to be less variable than those of the unutilized items. It was observed that the struck flakes tended to be long and narrow and that relatively more usage was found on the larger flakes.

DISCUSSION

Within the areas surveyed the striking differences in the situations of the sites and their decoration appear to be unusual for such a small part of one drainage system in Australia. How significant, then, are the contrasts drawn? All upland decorated sites are relatively unsheltered, landmark oriented, relatively far from water and tool stone sources, and exhibit extensive red paintings; whereas the lowland sites are in concealed and sheltered gullies, close to water and tool stone sources, and usually have minor decoration in white. The differences in painting colouration may have been due to the generally dark walls of the lowland sites and the pale ones of upland sites making ideal backgrounds for white and red respectively. While there is an emphasis on decoration in the upland sites, the large number of stone tools associated with the lowland sites suggest their predominance as manufacturing sites, no doubt due to their proximity to tool stone sources. The distance of the sites from water appears to be largely a function of topography, but the location of upland sites around easily recognizable landmarks must represent deliberate choice, for many suitable sites, particularly in Area 3, appear never to have been occupied.

Despite the important differences in painting colouration between Areas 1 and 2, and 3 and 4 of this survey, all paintings bear an obvious stylistic relationship to those found in the Carnarvon Gorge and Mount Moffatt areas. Motifs, techniques and colours in the upland sites in particular are similar to those in the Carnarvon Gorge as comparison of plate 10, figs 1 and 2, with Goddard (1941, plate 1c) shows. However, no single upland site in the Taroom district is as rich in paintings as the Art Gallery (Site SPE 8) in the Gorge (the 5 mile site, (Goddard, 1941:170)). Moreover, the engravings common in the Gorge sites (plate 10, fig. 4) were not found in the sites surveyed.

This extension of the area in which paintings typical of the Carnarvon Gorge occur is only to be expected, and the style may well extend over most of the central highlands. However the total distribution of this style and its relationships to the major painting styles of Australia are matters requiring further investigation.

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